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US-Nicaragua Relations October 1989

Background: Following the 1979 ouster of Anastasio Somoza, the US and the Sandinista "Government of National Reconstruction" enjoyed a relationship based on a mutual desire to rebuild Nicaragua's economy. Between July 1979 and April 1981, the US contributed $118 million in direct bilateral economic aid to Nicaragua. Sandinista support for insurgents in El Salvador, however, led the US Government to suspend aid in 1981. Continued support for subversive groups, strong anti-American policies, close ties to the Soviet Union and Cuba, and a domestic policy of repression of democratic elements led to further deterioration in relations. Internal dissatisfaction with Sandinista policies and frustration at the lack of legitimate opportunities for change have produced hundreds of thousands of refugees and led many Nicaraguans to join the armed Nicaraguan Resistance (called "contras" by the Sandinistas). Most of these combatants have been young peasant farmers; many are former Sandinistas. US military support for the Resistance was suspended in February 1988; humanitarian aid continues.

Negotiations: US efforts to reach a diplomatic agreement with the Sandinistas to promote peace and democratization, begun in 1981, continued with support for the regional peace efforts by the Contadora group of Latin American countries. Nine rounds of bilateral talks between the US and Nicaragua concerning the Contadora process in 1983 and 1984 broke down because the Sandinistas refused to compromise. In August 1987, however, the five Central American presidents signed the Esquipulas II accord (also known as the Arias plan). In it the Sandinistas committed Nicaragua to: national reconciliation, including a meaningful dialogue with all opposition groups and full amnesty for exiled Nicaraguans; a cease-fire with the Nicaraguan Resistance; full democratization, including freedom of the press and political parties; free, pluralistic, and fair elections; a cessation of all aid to insurgent movements; prevention of the use of Nicaraguan territory as a staging ground for attacks on Nicaragua's neighbors; protection of and assistance to refugees and displaced persons; cooperation with its neighbors to attain economic development in the region; and support of facilities and mechanisms for international verification of the accord's progress. The five presidents met again at Tesoro Beach, El Salvador, in February 1989, when Nicaragua agreed to hold free, open elections in February 1990. In August 1989, they signed the Tela accord, which committed Nicaragua to create safe, democratic conditions for the voluntary demobilization and repatriation of the Nicaraguan Resistance. The US is committed to working in good faith with the democratic leaders of Central America and Latin America to translate the bright promises of these regional agreements into specific realities.

US objectives: The Administration and Congress reached a bipartisan accord in March 1989 on a policy designed to support the commitments to democracy, peace, and security embodied in the Esquipulas II accord and subsequent accords signed by the five presidents. With regard to Nicaragua, the US is united in its goals of democratization, an end to

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subversion by Nicaragua of its neighbors, and an end to Soviet-bloc military ties that threaten US and regional security. The US supports the use of incentives and disincentives aimed at the establishment of credible standards of compliance by Nicaragua with its commitments, strict timetables for enforcement of those commitments, and effective means to verify the democratic and security requirements of the Esquipulas II accord. As a result of the bipartisan accord, Congress has approved an extension of humanitarian assistance at current levels ($4 million per month) to the Resistance until the national elections, promised by the Sandinistas for February 1990. These funds may be used to support voluntary repatriation and voluntary regional relocation by the Resistance, as provided in the Esquipulas II, Tesoro Beach, and Tela accords.

Support for internal opposition: The future of democracy in Nicaragua depends greatly on the ability of internal opposition groups to resist Sandinista efforts to dominate Nicaraguan political life and control all facets of the government and the armed forces. Support for the opposition has grown as Nicaraguans have become increasingly dissatisfied with life under the Sandinistas, but organized and spontaneous civic opposition activity has been difficult. The opposition is often fragmented, disorganized, and harassed by the Sandinistas.

Despite this, 14 opposition parties ranging from conservatives to communists, labor and business, Catholics and Protestants, have formed the National Opposition Union (UNO) to contest the 1990 elections. La Prensa editor Violeta Chamorro will be UNO's presidential candidate. The Nicaraguan Government promised in August 1989 to suspend the military draft during the campaign, repeal repressive public security and police laws, release some political prisoners, give the opposition limited access to TV, and take steps to tighten voting procedures. UNO has called for implementation of these reforms and further talks to create conditions for truly free, fair, and honest elections.

Promotion of human rights: The US strongly encourages respect for human rights in Nicaragua and throughout Central America. The Sandinistas, however, have developed Nicaragua's legal system, mass organizations, and armed forces into instruments of repression. Six thousand political prisoners and 800 conscientious objectors remain in jail awaiting amnesty.

The State Security Directorate in the Ministry of Interior has institutionalized human rights abuse with the national police system and the security prisons. The Sandinista constitution purports to provide wide-ranging civil liberties, yet narrowly defines these rights and preserves power in the hands of the Sandinista party.

In the Esquipulas II accord with its neighbors and the Sapoa agreements with the Resistance, the Sandinistas promised an amnesty to its political prisoners. The US and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, among others, have repeatedly urged the Nicaraguan Government to declare such an amnesty. In March 1989, the Sandinistas released 1,834 former National Guardsmen, while arbitrarily retaining in custody 39 of their comrades. Relatives of the 39 have led an international effort to obtain their release. Those prisoners freed under this partial pardon have repeatedly been targets of violence and harassment by elements of Nicaraguan Government forces.

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